

Intelligence Analysis and Policymaking

The Views of Ambassador Herman J. Cohen

Jack Davis

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Over the past several years, CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence (DI) has been engaged in a critical self-examination of its goals and practices regarding the analytic support provided to key policy officials. In the words of former Deputy Director for Intelligence (DDI) Douglas MacEachin, the DI “needs to go back to the basic questions of what we do and how we do it.” His short answer: the needs of the policymaker have to be “the driving factor in intelligence production.”¹ In this context, the Agency’s Center for the Study of Intelligence has been sponsoring a series of interviews on intelligence-policy relations with prominent officials who served during the administration of President George Bush. *In terms of their policymaking needs, what worked, what did not, and why.*

An article presenting the views of Amb. Robert Blackwill regarding his service on the NSC staff was published in the summer 1994 issue of *Studies in Intelligence*.² The views of Amb. Paul Wolfowitz, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, were published in an article in the spring 1995 edition of *Studies*.³ This article reports the views of Amb. Herman J. Cohen from the perspective of his service as Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, 1989-93. It is based on a series of interviews I conducted during August 1994.

Each set of interviews in the first instance represents the views and practices of an individual policy official, who brings to the discussion a distinctive set of experiences and

expectations regarding the world of intelligence. Each official, moreover, faced special circumstances while in office: the nature of the post, of the account, and of the community of analytic and policymaking specialists.

That said, the interviews of Ambassadors Blackwill, Cohen, and Wolfowitz point to several common themes:

- Experienced policy officials base their relations with intelligence analysts on professional self-interest—the need for effective support to meet demanding agendas.
- What constitutes effective support—what provides value added—varies considerably with the level of engagement of individual policy officials on an issue. Thus, policymakers actively managing an issue may find instructive detailed coverage that officials with passing interest do not. Alternatively, directly engaged officials may find little value in general coverage intended for a broad audience.
- Direct engagement not only increases the clarity of the policymaker’s guidance to analysts but also increases the insights of the former into the kinds of professional support the latter can provide. At times, then, taking the measure of the analyst’s expertise brings additional questions and tasking to the policymaker’s mind.

Ambassador Cohen’s positive and open approach to relations with

Jack Davis served in the Directorate of Intelligence.

analysts worked well for him; overall, he felt well served by the support he received. The analysts relished the opportunities he generated to provide support and the recognition he gave for jobs well done:

- Ambassador Cohen relied, more than most of his counterparts, upon reading analysts' self-initiated publications as a means of staying on top of his wide-ranging agenda. While he frequently expressed appreciation for help on such front-burner issues as prospects for change in South Africa, he just as regularly encouraged analysts working on secondary issues for which he was also responsible.
- Ambassador Cohen respected the expertise and disinterested views of analysts, and he made sure these were represented in person at interagency policy meetings.
- He appreciated analysts who made judgments that went beyond the hard evidence and took account of general expertise, history, and "intuition." And he felt well served when such judgments challenged his own. In his words, "analysts are supposed to analyze."

When asked what he would do differently in another tour of policymaking duty, Ambassador Cohen said he would "get to know the individual analysts better, so that he could put their considerable expertise to still greater advantage."

Curriculum Vita

Herman J. "Hank" Cohen's State Department career ran from 1955 to

1986. Most of his postings overseas and in Washington centered on Africa. He served as Director for Central African Affairs during 1969-74, and as Ambassador to the Republics of Senegal and The Gambia during 1977-80. Ambassador Cohen observed that in his overseas postings he got to know a good number of officers working for CIA's Directorate of Operations, some of whom he kept in contact with when he later served in policymaking positions in Washington.

From 1980 to 1984, he was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research (INR). This was his first continuing relationship with intelligence analysts, in INR, the DIA, the National Intelligence Council, and elsewhere.

He met on a weekly basis with the DIA and a high-ranking official from the Defense Intelligence Agency to discuss Intelligence Community affairs—resources, collection, plans, and coordination. He recalls that at these meetings DIA Robert Gates would regularly signal his intention of sending DIA analysts to serve in the regional and functional policy bureaus at State. Cohen quipped that he was "never sure whether this was a promise of help to the bureaus—or a threat to take over for INR."

Ambassador Cohen was Senior Director for Africa on the NSC Staff and Special Assistant to the President from January 1987 to January 1989. He served as Assistant Secretary of State for Africa for nearly all of the Bush administration and in the early months of the administration of President Clinton (April 1989-April 1993).

As Assistant Secretary, he was the principal US negotiator in attempts to resolve conflicts in Angola, Burundi, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Sudan. He also helped set the terms of engagement for the United States in encouragement of direct negotiations between blacks and whites for historic political changes in South Africa.

Ambassador Cohen now is Senior Adviser to the Global Coalition for Africa, a North-South policy forum.

Using Intelligence To Get the Job Done

The literature on intelligence and policymaking, going back at least to Sherman Kent's 1949 work on *Strategic Intelligence*, regularly makes the point that effective ties do not automatically fall into place but usually require initiative and persistence by the analytic component.⁴ Titles of articles published in *Studies in Intelligence* elaborate the point: "The Intelligence-Policy Tangle"; "Intelligence Ramps and Policy Lions"; "Dealing with Intelligence-Policy Disconnects"; "Tribal Tongues: Intelligence Consumers, Intelligence Producers"; "Bridging the Intelligence-Policy Divide."⁵

Ambassador Cohen's performance as Assistant Secretary for Africa was either an exception to or requires re-examination of the rule that the relationship is unnatural and troubled. He organized his day to maximize his use of intelligence analysis to help him get his job done. He encouraged the analysts to believe their support was needed, and he greeted their papers and their briefings with the

expectation that he would profit from them.

In part, his positive approach reflected his extended service as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in INR. He referred to INR as "family, just down the hall." In part, it reflected the nature of the African community of intelligence and policy professionals. African hands tend to cooperate, he observed, "because of the shared insecurity of working on the lowest priority [US foreign] policy account."

But in large measure it reflected Ambassador Cohen's sense of professional self-interest. Intelligence analysts in INR, in the DI, and elsewhere could deliver kinds of support that policy desk officers in the Africa Bureau could not. Analysts tended to have "more time to think." And they also "approached issues differently" because of their country expertise and, equally important, their special knowledge of economic and military affairs.

In many ways, Assistant Secretary Cohen was the *senior analyst on Africa* in the US Government. He understood and trusted the analysts' processes. He commented, for example, that he did not as a rule read embassy cables as they came in, because analysts did a good job of summarizing them in their daily publications.

As Assistant Secretary, Ambassador Cohen began his day by going over important overnight traffic and the daily publications—(from his point of view, principally the *State Department Summary* but also CIA's *National Intelligence Daily*) (NID)—

brought to his office by an INR officer. This usually involved 30 minutes of looking at the "hot stuff." On the basis of this intelligence, he would schedule meetings for later in the day and task the staff of the Africa Bureau.

Then he had his morning staff meeting with his deputy assistant secretaries to exchange views on the intelligence traffic and dailies. While INR was represented at his more broadly based weekly meetings, it did not participate in his morning staff meetings. As commentary on the nature of policymaking these days, Ambassador Cohen observed that a Public Affairs Officer did attend.

After his morning staff meeting, he usually set aside time for reading intelligence analysis, both articles he had tasked INR to do or commissioned others in the Intelligence Community to do, and unsolicited assessments, mostly from the Africa Division of the DI's Office of African and Latin American Analysis. From time to time, he set aside a period in the afternoon to discuss tasking for analysis with INR or to receive a specialized substantive briefing from analysts from INR or elsewhere in the Intelligence Community.

Ambassador Cohen judged that his reading regime was time well spent. Whether he invested 30 minutes in an in-depth DI study or 5 minutes in one of the shorter articles in the Africa Division's biweekly *Africa Review*, he garnered the information and insights he needed to do his job. On many issues, he knew of no more efficient way of staying informed.

Guidance Through Feedback

Ambassador Cohen observed that when he served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Africa on the NSC Staff, it seemed appropriate to make a direct input into the DI production planning process. The NSC Staff and the DI "seemed to be part of the same camp" and somehow apart from INR and other departmental intelligence units. Thus, he met regularly with managers of the DI's African analysis to suggest research papers and memorandums he would like to see undertaken.

Such direct intervention in the DI planning and production processes seemed to him inappropriate as Assistant Secretary. But his practice of frequent written commentary in response to the DI's self-initiated production, he observed, was intended to have some impact on planning.

Ambassador Cohen said he believes in feedback, in part because he himself welcomes recognition for a job well done. On major accounts, such as South Africa, he expressed his appreciation in writing time and time again:

- *Your typescript on the ANC [African National Congress] was first rate. As we in AF [State's Africa Bureau] try to come to grips with the unprecedented events in South Africa, the need for tight analysis of the black opposition's views will be increasingly critical to policy formulation.* (12 March 1990)

- *[Your research report "South Africa Grapples with Government*

Overtures") was very useful.... I am particularly impressed by the thorough manner you demonstrate in putting together the many bits and pieces of available intelligence.

(5 June 1990)

Ambassador Cohen was also appreciative of DI coverage of the many African accounts that were not front-burner issues. He cited as an example the Central African Republic (CAR), on which he had periodic exchanges with his French counterpart. The articles that appeared from time to time in *Africa Review* on developments and prospects for the CAR helped him stay at the ready for these exchanges. He let the authors and their managers in the DI know this, because he wanted such coverage to continue.

He stated that "the more esoteric the subject, the more I felt written recognition was needed to keep it coming." This practice was exemplified by a note he wrote to the senior INR Africanist about a DI article on a country with a population of 400,000 and little in the way of resources:

- *The Cape Verde article in... "Africa Review" is a role model for my needs. I hardly read anything on Cape Verde (and a lot of others). This piece gave a concise update on essential political and economic issues.* (17 March 1992)

Ambassador Cohen acknowledged with a nod and a smile the interviewer's observation that his notes as Assistant Secretary indicating he read every issue of *Africa Review* "from cover to cover" helped the publication survive periodic efforts to

abolish it on the grounds it was not an effective use of analysts' time.

For similar reasons, Ambassador Cohen found considerable value in DI reports on "arcane aspects" of economic and military affairs in African countries. Simply put, there was no other efficient way for him to gain access to these subjects in the detail that he sought. In one message to DI managers he called for more coverage in *Africa Review* of military issues in states experiencing civil violence.

Ambassador Cohen also expressed his high regard for the biographic reports of the DI's Office of Leadership Analysis (LDA). When he served on the NSC Staff, he would telephone LDA's African managers with his requests, and found the unit "very responsive." When he became Assistant Secretary, though, he relied on staff support to generate biographies relating to visits, negotiations, and other undertakings.

The NID and NIEs

Ambassador Cohen found NID coverage of Africa "thin and superficial." Mostly, when an African issue reached the threshold for publication in the NID, it involved a matter on which he was already directly engaged, and he personally gained little from what often was a summary of "yesterday's events."

In contrast, he found the interagency process that produced National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) and National Intelligence Council Memorandums of value in ascertaining Intelligence Community views and in using such views to manage the

policymaking process. At times, he commissioned estimative papers through INR. On South Africa in particular, Intelligence Community products served well in persuading the policymaking community, during 1990, that prospects for significant negotiations on political reform were promising.

Ambassador Cohen admitted at times he got engaged in the estimative process at the edges of the traditional separation between intelligence and policymaking mandates. INR would come to him with its substantive disagreements with existing drafts. He was asked where he stood on the issues in dispute, and how hard INR should fight to protect State's position.

Analysts at the Policymaking Table

Ambassador Cohen would arrange, through INR, to start off all interagency policy meetings that he chaired with an intelligence briefing. Often a team of analysts would participate, with DI analysts covering political developments and their DIA counterparts covering military subjects.

The goal here was to lay out what was known and what was assumed about the situation under discussion as objectively and authoritatively as possible. This discouraged the policy participants from tabling their own "ground truth" to spin the policy outcome of the meeting. In effect, the policy officials either had to challenge the intelligence analysts in the room or to accept their assessment of events and prospects.

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Analysts Should Analyze

Ambassador Cohen noted that the DI review process tended to result in a corporate and depersonalized product, certainly as compared with INR's more outspoken analytic style. "You knew which analyst stood behind INR articles, but as a rule you could not identify an individual's voice in DI articles."

He assumed that the DI review process, in its commitment to authoritativeness as well as corporate responsibility, tended to discourage lines of analysis that could not be well documented. In other terms, as he perceived it, formal DI publications relied too much on reporting and sources and not enough on extended argumentation and individual judgment.

"Analysts are supposed to analyze." As someone well informed on Africa, he was able to recognize when an analyst brought to bear history, general expertise, analogy, and "intuition." It was his responsibility as a policymaker to decide when and how much to rely on such judgments, but he certainly benefited in managing his agenda by having access to analysts' interpretative and predictive judgments.

Ambassador Cohen admitted that as an analyst of African affairs he did not relish having to admit that his own judgments needed correction. But he knew his success depended on working with sound premises. Thus, he needed and wanted to gain access to analysts' views that contradicted or went beyond his own. He cited, as an example, an effort to get serious peace talks started in a

war-torn African country. His judgment about what was needed to bring the rebel forces to the table was much less elaborate than what the analysts believed was needed. "The analysts were right."

Tactical and Customized Analysis

Ambassador Cohen felt both comfortable and well served in using INR as his agent for orchestrating intelligence activities on his behalf. INR, again, was "family," "down the hall," and "part of his daily life."

Besides, INR was aware of its resource limitations, and, in Ambassador Cohen's view, did not hesitate to get analysts from other agencies involved when they were the best ones to deliver the needed services. It was in this context that he noted the small size and cooperative nature of the African intelligence and policy communities in Washington.

As a State Department official, Ambassador Cohen did not think it appropriate to task the DI's African specialists directly, or to engage with them substantively on a routine basis over the telephone or in his office. He believed, however, he benefited indirectly from the frequent personal contact of others at State.

Not only INR analysts but also officers in his Africa Bureau were in almost daily contact with DI analysts on substantive and agenda matters. Ambassador Cohen met weekly with DO representatives, another indirect avenue for a DI input. When told that DI managers indicated that they regularly contributed to work done for him by State's Policy Planning Staff as well as INR, he accepted that as the way things were supposed to work.

South Africa as an Example

Ambassador Cohen cited intelligence support for a shift in US policy toward South Africa, in conjunction with the runup to dramatic political change in that country, as an example of the system working extremely well.

Community analysts, especially DI analysts, were quick to see a window of opportunity for political change with the shift in generations of white political leaders symbolized by the coming to power of F. W. de Klerk as President of the Republic in September 1989. Ambassador Cohen himself had reservations about talk of the end of apartheid, because he had heard it from predecessor South African leaders. In typescripts and NIIs, the analysts made a convincing case regarding meaningful prospects for change. This, and the word he was getting from respected South Africans directly and through excellent human-source intelligence, changed his views from skeptical to hopeful.

As it turned out, the new generation of white South African leaders in

their fifties were "for real" when they talked about reform, in a way that the older generation of leaders they replaced never was. Ambassador Cohen made use of an impressive volume of first-rate collection and analysis to help turn US policy from its previous measured hostility to white South African leaders to even-handed encouragement of both whites and blacks to stay the course in their often fractious direct negotiations.

Using the DI's Special Expertise

Ambassador Cohen made clear that he was impressed by DI analysts with whom he got to interact on a one-on-one basis. He benefited from the range of their knowledge about their accounts and their readiness to engage with him on assumptions and forecasts.

But, for the most part, he felt he did not get to know the DI analysts the way he did the INR group and Agency DO officers. DI analysts were "far away" and "not part of my daily life." However useful he found the contents, the "bland" and corporate character of DI formal publications made it difficult for him to take the measure of individual analysts.

Ambassador Cohen accepted invitations to visit CIA Headquarters a couple of times each year. After having lunch with a small group of managers, he met with 25 or more analysts in a conference room. He

enjoyed these exchanges, but there were too many analysts present to take their individual measure.

He cited two instances in which he benefited considerably from the special expertise of DI analysts:

- In frustration, he once told INR that he "just did not understand the military situation in Angola." INR arranged for a briefing in his office by a DI analyst who specialized in the subject. Ambassador Cohen was surprised to find out that an analyst was working full time on military affairs in Angola, impressed by the analyst's command of the subject (assumptions as well as information), and got into much more specialized lines of questioning than he had originally intended.
- In another instance, at a policy meeting regarding a crisis in Zaire, a DI analyst who had served in that country as an intelligence officer overseas "took command" of the proceedings with his "fabulous" base of information and analysis. In fact, he pulled the meeting to what Ambassador Cohen saw as an unorthodox but unanimously approved summary of the situation and outlook. Ambassador Cohen subsequently arranged for the analyst to accompany him on exchanges with French and Belgian officials of the situation in Zaire.

When informed that a couple of DI analysts believed he had not made as

much use of their expertise as they would have liked, Ambassador Cohen asked for more information on the matter. I reported that the analysts had produced their own memorandums, contributed to NIEs and INR drafts, and briefed members of the Africa Bureau. But the analysts had never been engaged personally with him. They greatly respected his command of the issues at hand, and they would have welcomed his probing questions.

Ambassador Cohen concluded that, if he were again appointed to a comparable policymaking position, he would arrange for a series of informal exchanges to take the measure of experts in the DI and elsewhere in the Intelligence Community. Policymakers, like analysts, are "prisoners of the intelligence we collect." The more the policymaker knows about the capabilities of analysts, the more help he can get to meet the challenges of his office.

NOTES

1. "The Tradecraft of Analysis: Challenge and Change in CIA's Directorate of Intelligence" (1 August 1994).
2. "A Policymaker's Perspective on Intelligence Analysis."
3. "Paul Wolfowitz on Intelligence-Policy Relations."
4. *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (1949), pp. 180ff.
5. The issues of *Studies*, in order: summer 1984, fall 1986, summer 1989, summer 1992, fall 1993.